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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000453

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [TU](#) [TBIO](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: POLITICAL FALLOUT FROM BIRD FLU LIKELY
LONG-TERM

REF: ANKARA 206

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: The Turkish Government has handled its Avian Influenza (AI) outbreaks well, blunting criticism from the opposition. The GOT has also taken some political risks. Possible long-term effects of AI could be both positive and negative, depending on how successful the government is in meeting constituent needs. They include:

--Turkey leveraging its newfound AI expertise both in the region, and possibly in Europe;

--Positive GOT experience in interagency cooperation and transparency that it should replicate at home in other areas;

--Significant lifestyle changes for the tens of thousands of families who depend on their few backyard chickens, which could translate into vote losses for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP);

--Financial upheaval for all connected to the poultry producing sector; and

--A possible GOT realization of the need for greater Kurdish language broadcasting to help educate many in the underdeveloped east and southeast - a project that could reap substantial political dividends, but is unlikely in the near-term. End summary and comment.

¶2. (SBU) The Turkish Government has dealt with its broad Avian Influenza (AI) outbreak expeditiously and transparently in the eyes of international experts, including the U.S. AI team. Positive statements by the WHO, EU and U.S. teams on the GOT's response - coupled with a lack of new human cases - likely helped blunt early domestic criticism that the GOT was late off the mark. The opposition, sensing it was gaining no ground here, moved on to more fruitful "bash the government" pastures.

The Downside ...

¶3. (C) The real consequences of AI in Turkey will have political and economic elements that will become apparent in the longer term. The Turks have culled over 1.5 million birds. Most of these were so-called backyard chickens, i.e., the few chickens families traditionally maintain to keep them in eggs and protein - a practice that is centuries old. It is a lifestyle that the Health Minister, visiting the home town of the first human victims, stated publicly should be relegated to history. The few Turkish lira these families are to receive in exchange for their culled chickens will not long keep them in eggs. For the most part, these are poor people, just scraping by, and this represents a real

hardship. If the GOT and/or local government fail to provide alternatives and targeted development plans (Health Minister Akdag has proposed covered village shelters where chickens could be raised), the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) risks losing many voters to nationalist and/or conservative parties that have traditionally wooed the agricultural vote. An AKP Vice Chair denied that AI would cost the party agricultural votes, adding that the TL 3 per bird the government was offering was sufficiently generous that some unscrupulous farmers were killing healthy birds for compensation.

¶4. (SBU) The economic pain is real, and not just for the backyard farmers. With poultry consumption down as much as 90% countrywide, everyone along the large-scale chicken production chain is suffering. Many, especially those involved in production, could lose their jobs and an entire industry could be crippled, increasing AI's impact on the economy. Politicians realize this, and can regularly be seen on TV, chowing down on chicken, to try to lure back consumers. Since many aren't eating chicken, anecdotal reports indicate that fish and meat consumption are up. ConGen Istanbul reports that fish prices have tripled in some places as a result.

¶5. (SBU) The government is also deeply concerned that AI reports could affect tourism. An AKP contact told us that, as yet, there has not been no impact, but it is too early to tell (see reftel).

... and the Potential Upside

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¶6. (C) The AI outbreaks have some potential silver linings as well. The effective performance by governments at the national and local levels should have won points. The GOT, provincial governors and local officials have been transparent, creative, welcoming of foreign assistance, and unusually effective. The GOT's response has highlighted that interministerial cooperation - usually a rarity in Turkey - works; it has not been perfect, but much more cross-cutting and comprehensive than normal. Turkish officials have also gained expertise. And since migratory birds don't recognize international borders, the GOT is in a position to assist, share lessons learned and serve as a model in the region. As the EU has helped Turkey, Turkey may, in this case, also be in a position to help the EU.

¶8. (C) The GOT could potentially draw at least one other lesson from AI: in addition to the need for more effective development efforts in relatively backward areas of the country, communication is key. With limited means to broadcast effectively in Kurdish, the GOT was hamstrung in its efforts to reach illiterate citizens in the east and southeast. GOT nemesis ROJ-TV, broadcasting from Denmark, produced public service announcements in Kurdish, according to a reliable Embassy contact. This realization might help nudge the naysayers in Turkey one step closer to opening up real Kurdish broadcasting that could help educate Kurdish-origin citizens throughout Turkey and reap the government many dividends.

WILSON